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ABSTRACT

During 1985, in-depth interviews were conducted with Open University students and staff to explore their perceptions of studying with the university and, in particular, their reactions to cuts in services. Findings indicated the great importance to students of feeling "in touch with" the university, of making personal contact with its staff and students. The tutor or tutor-counselor was found to have a particularly important role in meeting students' need to be in touch. Tutors had a key function for students as interpreters of the meaning of the course and of what was required in its assessment. Respondents to the Student Opinion Survey ranked the number of tutorials offered as having changed for the worse. High percentages of students also indicated that contact with students and helpfulness of the tutor had changed for the worse. Students were also highly concerned about fees. Two areas of concern for the university were indicated: the possibility of mismatches in the perceptions of staff and students of the value of different forms of communication and the particularly important role of tutors and tutor-student contact, which is progressively being undermined by cuts. (A list of three references and six data tables are appended.) (YLB)

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STUDENT RESEARCH CENTRE

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Report No. 1

EFFECTIVE STUDY IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY : THE HUMAN DIMENSION

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February 1986

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The STUDENT RESEARCH CENTRE was set up within the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology at the beginning of 1986. It brought together staff previously involved in the Student Learning and Development Programme and in the Information and Intelligence Centre. The Student Research Centre's work is concerned with research into and evaluation of all aspects of student learning, focussing particularly on those aspects resulting from the distance learning situation of Open University students.

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EFFECTIVE STUDY IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY : THE HUMAN DIMENSION

INTRODUCTION

During 1985 and 1986, the Open University is having to find savings of £10 million, and in the immediate future the financial position is likely to remain very serious. There has already been a reduction in services and provision, sufficient to cause concern within the University that the quality, as well as the quantity, of educational opportunities we offer may have diminished as a result.

During 1985, the Student Learning and Development Programme[1] in IET conducted in-depth interviews with Open University students and staff[2] to explore their perceptions of studying with the University and in particular their reactions to cuts in provision. We take it as axiomatic that it is our students' needs which must take priority ultimately, and therefore that we should attend especially closely to their perceptions of what helps or hinders them in their studies. Accordingly, we are choosing here to focus on an area of consensus we have found among students we interviewed. This paper should also be read in conjunction with two others, one of which concentrates on the views of part-time staff (Melton, R. et al, 1986) the other on students' open-ended comments to the 1985 Student Opinion Survey (Mason, R. and Morgan, A. 1986).

PERSONAL CONTACT AND STUDENTSHIP

We have been struck by the very great importance to students of feeling 'in touch with' the University, of making personal contact with its staff and students. For most of the students we interviewed, studying with the Open University has much greater significance than a process of mere credit accumulation and often represents a major development in their lives. Students see themselves as members of a university with a special character and significance. Many become intensely involved in an educational experience which affects not only their intellectual development, but perceptions of themselves, their jobs, their personal relationships and life goals.

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1 This programme has now merged with other groups to form the Student Research Centre in IET.

2 34 students and 15 part-time staff were selected from the population of four second level courses in 1983 in two regions - Yorkshire and East Anglia.

At some level, usually anecdotal, these wider kinds of impact of the University on its students are acknowledged. At another level, they often appear to be taken note of lightly, as if of secondary importance, tangential to the 'real' educational process. We would say, on the basis of this study, that this is to misunderstand the significance of students' personal involvement with the University, which affects their motivation and how effectively they study. Students' sense of being a member of 'a real university' (not a correspondence college) which makes personal contact with them in a variety of ways, is not just an enjoyable by-product of the educational process but intrinsic to it. Students are saying that without this human dimension they cannot study as effectively and some would probably not choose to study with us at all. For many, personal contact of some kind is the basis of their studentship.

We have found that the tutor/tutor- counsellor has a particularly important role in meeting students' need to be in-touch with a university community. Their contact with tutors and, through tutors with other students, contrasts with the rest of course provision, prepared for students in general and inevitably more impersonal.[1]

Having a good tutor was seen by most interviewees as vitally important in helping them get the most out of a course and achieve a credit. TMAs so often provide the backbone of their study and are the most important vehicle for feedback to the students on their progress and understanding. Tutorials were also commented on, and provided a significant opportunity for individuals to bolster their motivation and to tackle problems of understanding. It is at tutorials that a tutor is most accessible and most able to respond flexibly to students, establishing a relationship which often enables them to make the best use of 'distance media' (principally telephone and correspondence) the rest of the time.

We found the strongest concern among students about the prospect of further cuts in the area especially of contact with tutors and tutor-counsellors. A student studying for her third credit, for example, was asked how she would feel about having fewer tutorials:-

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1 But students did praise the quality of course units, partly because, in being so student-oriented, they do often make more personal contact than the traditional text book.

Student:

> "That's the worst thing they could do - that would kill it - where would you go for help if you can't go to your tutorial? - You can ring him up but you get more out of going to the pub, discussing the tutorial...that tutorial is central to everything; it has a social and academic function, they are inter-linked - 1½ hours a month is not a lot compared with college - how can you cut down on that? On my course he rushes through, he's so good, I can unravel it then, it's like knitting."

Interviewer:

> "If it's so little, how can you miss it?"

Student:

> It's like posts and you fill in the wire netting. The posts are there and he provides them. It is directing. If I hadn't been to that tutorial I wouldn't know what the hell they were talking about. Tutors explain what the course is aiming at. Without the tutorial the units are just a foreign language. It gives you the key and no more - you can't in 1½ hours. He unlocks it. If there were no more tutorials I would give it up now - I couldn't understand it."
>
> Social Science Student (School Teacher)

TUITION AND EFFECTIVE STUDY

From these and a number of similar remarks and accounts from students, it appears that tutors have a key function for students as interpreters of the meaning of the course and of what is required in its assessment. This interpretive role seems to play a crucial part in student learning, especially when it occurs through dialogue with other students. Dialogue enables students to find out what is required of them in a way not fulfilled by study guides or assignment guides. Students describe tutorials as helping them see the 'wood from the trees' in the course material and how to tackle different subject areas.

One student, for example, explained how he had sorted out difficulties in adapting to a Systems course, after having taken the Social Science foundation course:

> "I'd missed the tutorials from moving house - I'd not got the necessary base to start on from missing tutorials - so my first two essays, which I thought were the best I'd ever done, got poor marks - I was getting really demoralised. I'd phoned the tutor twice, he was never in. I wrote to him, no response. In the end I phoned the counsellor and explained things. Eventually the tutor phoned and resolved the problems."

The same student commented on the summer school associated with the course:

> "I found the Systems Summer School very useful as it was the first time I'd met any tutor and we had a good session and sorted it out and my grades improved. I know what he wanted. I knew what the course wanted - it was a different approach to writing a general type of essay, it was using a systems approach, using diagrams, notes etc. to explain points - if I had gone to those early tutorials I would have understood what was wanted."
>
> Trainee Accountant

As with other course components, students' evaluations of tuition differ and individual reactions also change in response to the particular demands of different courses. One student for example, had found travel to tutorials so time-consuming on an earlier course that she felt the time was better spent on study at home. However, she went on to describe aspects of her current course where tutorials had a function she particularly valued:

Interviewer:

> "You can manage without tutorials?"

Student:

> "It's probably more important now. The tutorial I missed was lab-work on action potential. I could have done with that experience. I understand the theory but I would remember it better if I had seen it done. I prefer not to miss any more."
>
> Science Student (Qualified Nurse)

This student described herself earlier as "a loner", someone who likes to sort things out for herself. Nonetheless, she had wanted someone to be available "on the end of a phone or contactable if I was really stuck".

Some students however, valued discussion particularly, because it helped them develop a fuller understanding of the course. One student for example, found the change from a foundation course to a second level course presented new difficulties because of the reduced number of tutorials - one in May and the next in September. He was missing the contact he had had at foundation level and felt he would miss it even more at third level.

> "I work very hard at maintaining contact among students - just for the pleasure of talking over a subject...tutorial assistance is invaluable...When you read something yourself, you accept it - you challenge it more in a group. You get different responses and interpretations - yours may be wrong. The range of ideas and experiences is important. Discussion refreshes you and you can go back to study."
>
> Social Science Student (Ex-Teacher, Policeman)

Other students also commented on the value of frequent tutorials in the foundation year and the role of the tutor-counsellor:

> "When I started, I'll give the O.U. its due - it was very very good for the foundation course. We had an early meeting with the tutor in November - then two weeks later again. Then through the course the tutorial group met (almost) every week...coupled with the radio programmes which discussed TMA questions, it got you into a way of working and thinking."

Even though most students do not use their counsellor regularly after the foundation year, the existence of a counselling service remains important and expresses the university's commitment to its students, views expressed in these comments from two students:

> I would like to know that there was a counsellor there all the time, so I could phone up whenever I wanted to. Whether it's only once or twice a year, it's having someone there if you wanted to."

> "One of the most impressive aspects of the O.U. is how much they care about their students. Having tutor-counsellors is one of the ways in which they convey that care."

Taken as a whole, these findings are especially significant because they add a qualitative dimension to quantitative findings which tend in the same direction, and are discussed below.

THE EXTENT TO WHICH TUTORS AND TUTORIALS ARE VALUED

The findings (Kelly, P. and Swift, B. 1983) of a 1983 course-based survey of post-foundation tuition established the key role of the tutor for the majority of Open University students. A random sample of students was taken (5,763) from those studying 24 courses (four from each faculty, with a mix of half and full-credit courses at second

and third level). Sixty-seven percent of respondents to the survey agreed with the statement:

> "A good tutor can make a course, a poor tutor can spoil one"

and 68% with the view that:

> "If there was no provision for contact with a course tutor, the O.U. would lack credibility as an academic institution."
> (Appendix Table 1.)

In response to the statement:

> "Apart from having my TMAs graded and commented on, I don't want or need any other contact with a tutor..."

over 75% indicated they disagreed. Across the six faculties, the percentages ranged from 73% to 82%.

Similar proportions in the range 60% to 70% agreed with the statements:

> "Some aspects of most courses can only be taught effectively on a face-to-face basis..."

> "Without a course tutor there would be no-one in the O.U. system to whom I could turn for help with study problems..."
> (Appendix Table 1.)

Other areas of this survey confirmed that, despite difficulties in using study centres, there is still strong support for face-to-face tutorials. Thirty-nine percent of all students said that they had needed more tutorials on post-foundation courses than were available, and over 40% said that if the amount of tutor support were reduced, it would adversely affect their ability to cope with Open University studies (see Appendix Table 2). Since these students were reporting on their experience in studying in 1982 and earlier, we could reasonably expect these percentages to be higher were we to repeat the survey now, after the cuts of 1984 and 1985.

In January 1985, IET mailed a Student Opinion Survey to a random sample of students who had gained two or more credits by Open University study.[1] Some of the findings, covering students' experience of 1984, can be usefully reported in the light of the argument being developed here. There is more evidence for example of the particular importance of tuition. Over 70% of respondents rated 'helpfulness of my tutor' as important/very important - a significantly higher rating than that given to 'level of tuition fees' and 'summer school fees' (see Appendix Table 3). Seventy-six percent of respondents had attended at least one tutorial (80% of those who passed their course(s)), 69% had initiated phone contact with their tutor and 34% with their counsellor, during 1984. Only 9% of students neither attended tutorials, nor self-help meetings, nor contacted their tutor, nor contacted their counsellor.

THE EROSION OF TUITION

Respondents to the Student Opinion Survey were also asked to rank a number of factors according to whether they felt they had changed for the better or worse. Again tuition ranked very high on this list, with 34% of all students rating the number of tutorials on offer as having changed for the worse. Twenty-seven percent also said contact with other students had changed for the worse, and 19% that helpfulness of their tutor had worsened (see Appendix Table 4).

Tables 5 and 6 in the Appendix also show a high degree of student concern about fees, but there is an awareness in the university of the significance of this issue for students. We feel however, that there is not a similar awareness of the level of concern among students about tuition.

In support of our findings here, we would finally draw attention to the evidence provided by open-ended responses to the Student Opinion Survey, where students were not influenced by the terms of the question to comment on one course component rather than another. We have analysed (Mason, R. and Morgan, A. 1986) the open-ended responses of about one-third of the questionnaires and note that spontaneous comment about tutors/tutor-counsellors/tutorials provides the single largest category of response and was the subject which most occupied students. When asked what changes

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1 2,288 students (84%) responded to this survey, which will be repeated in 1986, to monitor relative changes in student experience.

within the Open University had hindered them, well over one third of the students mentioned the drop in tutorial provision and the inaccessible locations of tutorials. Students in the higher level courses particularly complained of isolation and a good number of them called for more tutorials.

TUITION IN PERSPECTIVE

We are aware that our argument in this paper could be misrepresented. We could be seen, for example, as making uncritical evaluations of the contribution of tutors and the necessity of tutorials. This is not our intention. Even less would we argue that the model of provision before the cuts represents an educational ideal to which we must return at all costs. We fully accept that, like every other area of individual effort in the university, the tutorial system has good, less good/much less good tutors practising within it. We are also aware that tutorials are an imperfect instrument, even at the best of times, because of their inaccessibility for quite large proportions of our students and the varying abilities of part-time staff to meet the range of needs of all the individuals who attend.

Furthermore, tuition is not the only means through which students keep in touch with and feel part of the university. Over fifteen years the university has developed a network of different forms of communication from which each individual can select those which suit his or her preferences and circumstances and thus build up a personal sense of what 'studying with the Open University' means. And, as much as we would like to discover general rules about the effectiveness of different media and course designs, our strong impression is that there is so much variation in what affect students and what they choose to make use of, that such generalisations are suspect. Some extol Summer School for example, while others reject it or have been disappointed; some do value TV while others hardly watch at all.

We are not, therefore, implying that tuition is somehow sacred or that the contribution of part-time tutors should not be carefully examined. What we are saying is that the human dimension of students' experience of studying with the University is crucially important, fostering a sense of identity with the University, the opposite of which might be alienation from the University. We have discovered that students speak very directly about their need for high quality personal contact and of the central role

tuition has within a network of communications, through which they achieve their own form of 'connectedness' to the University. We do not conclude however, that other elements and other media making up the network are unimportant or can be lightly discarded, and we comment on the implications of this in our conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS

We do not feel that the evidence we have thus far justifies an 'alarmist' reaction. Ninety-four percent of our respondents to the 1985 Student Opinion Survey agreed with the statement 'I would recommend the Open University to other people'. Most students are not as yet reporting a major change for the worse in their experience of study (though they are doing so in relation to fee levels). This should reassure us, particularly since our official policy has been to seek to protect students as far as is possible from the effects of the cuts.

However, in answering most of the questions in the Student Opinion Survey, students were reflecting on several years (at least three years) study with the Open University; for many of them, years in which the full richness of our provision for students was on offer. And we have found evidence from a significant proportion of respondents of changes for the worse in areas of the university's provision which they value highly for learning. Already over a third of our students perceived the number of tutorials on offer to have changed for the worse by 1984, in spite of our efforts to protect them; 26% of our survey respondents had little feeling of belonging to the Open University and 47% did not feel that they had received a lot of help from their tutor in 1984.

Our concern in reporting these and other findings in the paper, is to alert the university to two things : firstly, the possibility of mismatches in the perceptions of staff and students of the value of different forms of communication, and secondly to draw attention to the fact that tuition (tutors, TMAs and tutor/student contact) has a particularly important role and is being progressively undermined by cuts.

The university's full-time staff may understandably regard the variety of media and course components they have developed principally as devices to promote cognitive mastery of subject material. Some may be thought more effective than others, some

made mandatory and others offered on a voluntary basis. For students however, these different media and course components also represent opportunities for effective participation in a university; they become symbols of membership of an intellectual and social community, as well as a means to the end of credit achievement.

The importance of what we are saying for policy is this : in our need to find savings, we may start to value only those parts of our provision which seem to us (as full-time staff) essential for achieving a course credit. If this leads us to cut primarily all those components and features we might be tempted to label 'voluntary' or 'optional' extras, we will thereby offer a much less rich network of opportunities for involvement in the university and therefore for effective study with the university. The implication is that if we reduce the range of educational experiences we offer students, we disappoint and disadvantage a proportion of them.

Doubtless a counter argument is that, if we are forced to make large financial savings, then this is a situation we all have to accept, however regrettable. But there are dangers for the University in this situation and we conclude by drawing attention to those which are particularly indicated by the research findings we have discussed above.

- Firstly, by progressively paring down the educational experience we offer, we run the risk of destroying eventually the basis of enthusiasm of most of our students and not just a small minority.

- Secondly, the reduction of opportunities for inter-personal academic contact leads not only to a more limited service, but to a service whose overall effectiveness and purpose has been undermined. In some cases for instance, the number of tutorials is already so low that tutors and students question the value of what remains. There may be a threshold in the provision of tuition beyond which more cuts lead not just to a further stage in the reduction of provision, but to the collapse of the system as a whole. Were this to happen, we feel that the effects for our students would be very serious indeed.

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Institute of Educational Technology/Open University (mimeo)

APPENDIX

Table 1

Student need and demand for tutor contact, by main faculty[1]

	ARTS		SOCIAL SCIENCE		SCHOOL OF EDUCATION		MATHS		SCIENCE		TECHNOLOGY	
	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %
Apart from having my TMAs graded and commented on, I don't want or need any other contact with a tutor..	4	81	7	82	8	75	12	73	8	77	7	74
If there was no provision for contact with a course tutor, the O.U. would lack credibility as an academic institution..	72	13	67	16	70	13	63	15	70	14	67	13
Some aspects of most courses can only be taught effectively on a face-to-face basis	57	16	60	16	58	16	54	20	60	16	59	17
Without a course tutor there would be no-one in the O.U. system to whom I could turn to for help with study problems	59	18	66	20	70	14	59	17	74	15	57	17

* The percentages quoted refer only to the agree and disagree answer categories. The remaining students had mixed views or no views on the issues.

[1] Source: Kelly and Swift, 1983 : p.4

Table 2

Student attitudes to the level of tutor support by main faculty[1]

	ARTS		SOCIAL SCIENCE		SCHOOL OF EDUCATION		MATHS		SCIENCE		TECHNOLOGY	
	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Disagree %
I've needed more tutorials on post-foundation courses than were available.	41	35	42	31	36	39	34	43	39	38	40	33
If the amount of tutor support were reduced it would adversely affect my ability to cope with OU studies	50	27	48	31	47	32	42	34	42	33	43	31
I would prefer to reduce the number of TV broadcasts and have more tutor contact instead	50	26	59	20	52	24	43	29	32	42	37	33

[1] Source: Kelly and Swift, 1983 : p.6

Table 3

Student ratings of 'helpfulness of tutors'[1]

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very satisfactory	30	30	25	10	5	Very unsatisfactory
Very important	36	35	20	6	3	Not at all important
Changed for worse	6	13	64	12	5	Changed for better

[1] Source: Student Opinion Survey, IET 1985

Table 4

Students' perception of the degree of change in different aspects of their Open University experience[1]

	Changed for worse			Changed for better			
	1	2	3	4	5	1+2	Rank
The level of tuition fees	40.1	32.2	25.1	1.7	.8	72.3	1
Summer School fees	30.2	28.6	38.7	1.4	1.0	58.8	2
Number of tutorials on offer	11.8	21.9	60.2	4.6	1.5	33.7	3
Cost of set books	10.6	19.6	66.1	2.9	.8	30.2	4
Extent of help with fees from outside the family	16.6	12.2	62.1	4.7	4.5	28.8	5
Amount of contact with other students	8.9	17.6	64.7	6.1	2.7	26.5	6
The range of courses available to choose from	6.2	15.8	50.8	21.4	5.7	22.0	7
Helpfulness of my tutor(s)	5.9	12.5	64.5	11.8	5.3	18.4	8
Helpfulness of counselling	4.5	6.4	78.4	7.2	3.4	10.9	9
The value an O.U. degree is seen to have	2.0	7.2	48.1	31.0	11.7	9.2	10
Fairness of assessment procedures	2.4	5.9	79.1	9.9	2.6	8.3	11

[1]Source: Student Opinion Survey, IET 1985

Table 5

The extent of student satisfaction with different aspects of their Open University experience[1]

	Very satisfactory				Very unsatisfactory		
	1	2	3	4	5	4+5	Rank
Extent of help with fees from outside the family	21.8	11.3	26.0	11.9	29.0	40.9	1
The level of tuition fees	7.0	15.1	37.7	26.2	14.0	40.2	2
Amount of contact with other students	9.2	15.8	40.7	21.4	13.0	34.4	3
Summer School fees	9.3	14.3	42.8	21.4	12.1	33.5	4
Number of tutorials on offer	15.7	24.9	32.9	17.5	9.1	26.6	5
Cost of set books	9.6	19.2	46.4	18.3	6.5	24.8	6
Helpfulness of counselling	22.3	19.6	40.0	10.8	7.2	18.0	7
The value an O.U. degree is seen to have	22.1	34.5	28.1	11.8	3.5	15.3	8
Helpfulness of my tutor(s)	30.3	30.4	24.5	10.4	4.5	14.9	9
The range of courses available to choose from	18.7	38.9	29.6	10.9	1.9	12.8	10
Fairness of assessment procedures	30.0	35.4	25.3	7.2	2.2	9.4	11

[1]Source: Student Opinion Survey, IET 1985

Table 6

The degree of importance to students of different aspects of their Open University experience[1]

	Very important				Not at all important		
	1	2	3	4	5	1+2	Rank
Fairness of assessment procedures	44.5	33.1	20.2	1.4	.7	77.6	1=
The range of courses available to choose from	35.9	41.7	18.0	3.2	1.1	77.6	1=
The value an O.U. degree is seen to have	42.6	29.7	16.5	6.4	4.8	72.3	3
Helpfulness of my tutor(s)	36.2	35.0	19.6	6.5	2.7	71.2	4
Extent of help with fees from outside the family	29.5	18.5	27.4	9.2	15.4	48.0	5
The level of tuition fees	25.5	22.1	27.9	16.6	7.9	47.6	6
Number of tutorials on offer	21.6	25.8	28.0	14.7	9.9	47.4	7
Summer School fees	21.6	17.5	28.0	16.2	16.6	39.1	8
Amount of contact with other students	15.6	22.4	29.4	16.6	16.0	38.0	9
Cost of set books	15.5	19.8	34.7	18.1	11.9	35.3	10
Helpfulness of counselling	16.9	18.0	36.5	15.8	12.8	34.9	11

[1] Source: Student Opinion Survey, IET 1985

Reports of the Student Research Centre

Copies of SRC reports are available from the Centre on request

No.1 Effective Study in the Open University : The Human Dimension
Mary Thorpe, *et al* (February 1986)
Published as 'The Human Dimension in Open University Study'
in Open Learning Vol.1, No.2 (1986)

No.2 The Rough and the Smooth - Students' Experiences of O.U. Study
Robin Mason with Alistair Morgan (January 1986)

No.3 Reactions of Part-time Tutors to Financial Cuts in the Open University
Reg Melton, *et al* (February 1986)
Published as 'Are Our Tutors Satisfied?'
in Open Learning Vol.1, No.2 (1986)